



# When is it Wrong NOT to Have A Child?

Dr. Meredith McFadden  
She/her/hers  
University of Wisconsin-Whitewater

15<sup>th</sup> Annual International Conference on Philosophy  
Athens Institute for Education and Research  
May 2020

# Better and Worse Times to Have a Child

- ▶ Warfare/Political unrest
- ▶ Material Resources
- ▶ Potential for Environmental Collapse

These conditions put the child (and family) at predictable and high risk of having a worse, or bad life.

# Tech increasing Parental Choice

- ▶ Advances in medical technology
  - ▶ In vitro with pre-implantation genetic diagnosis
  - ▶ Prenatal testing
  - ▶ (future) genetic testing with manipulation w/CRISPR cas-9
- ▶ Considerations of the child's likely health state are becoming more and more possible to enter into deliberations regarding becoming a parent

# Note: Becoming a Parent

- ▶ There are many ways to become a parent, and that isn't what this discussion is about:
  - ▶ Bearing a child that may or may not be genetically related to you
  - ▶ Adopting a child
  - ▶ Supporting a surrogate bearing a child that may or may not be biologically related to you
  - ▶ Etc.
- ▶ The focus is on the decision to become a parent

# Outline

- ▶ Main concern: Having a child isn't a moral obligation, but it is possible to "go wrong" in your deliberation if you make your choice whether to have a child based on (what I will call) *conditional parent-centered reasons*
- ▶ **Section One:** *How is becoming a parent morally evaluable?*
- ▶ **Section Two:** *What is a child-centered reason?*
- ▶ **Section Three:** *What is parent-centered reason?*
- ▶ **Section Four:** *What sort of reasons are morally problematic for selecting against disadvantage?*
- ▶ **Conclusion**

# Section One

HAVING A CHILD IS NOT  
MORALLY NEUTRAL

# Becoming a Parent

- ▶ Becoming a parent is optional
  - ▶ Like renting an apartment
- ▶ Nevertheless, the way one goes about it (reasoning, intention, impact) can be morally problematic

# Section Two

CHILD-CENTERED REASONS

# The Interests of the Child

- ▶ Does the child have a reasonable likelihood of living a fulfilling life?
- ▶ Harm based view: welfare concerns, avoiding harm, reaching threshold of minimally satisfying life, allowing for some harm (outweighed)
- ▶ Virtue based view: what conduces to flourishing, allowing for adversity/harm (necessary for flourishing)

# Child-Centered Reasons to Not Have Child

- ▶ Cases where an potential parent sees predictable harm undermines child's interests (either on virtue- or harm-based view)
  - ▶ Political unrest/conflict
  - ▶ More narrow scenarios having to do with a feature of the child
- ▶ NOTE : It is often very hard to accurately assess future child's flourishing or welfare

# Section Three

PARENT-CENTERED REASONS

# The interests of the Parent

- ▶ How will becoming a parent to the potential child affect the life of the parent?
  - ▶ (again, difficult to predict: L.A. Paul – Transformative Experience)
- ▶ Parents have preferences, goals, and relationships (well, yes, everyone does)
- ▶ IF the potential parent has reasonable expectation that the child is expected to be likely to flourish, what moral space is there for the potential parent to *conditionally* opt-in?

# Opting to be a Parent versus Conditionally Opting-In

- ▶ Parent-centered reasons surely inform decision to become a potential parent in the first place
- ▶ Reasons for/against becoming a parent that a parent-centered
  - ▶ Other priorities or goals
  - ▶ Relationships to nurture that would/would not support child-rearing
  - ▶ Commitments/preferences that support or are incompatible w/child rearing
- ▶ NOTE: These reasons are not conditional

# So far, not clearly morally problematic

- ▶ Child-centered reasons, perhaps all?
- ▶ Parent-centered reasons – to have or not have children

# Section Four

CONDITIONALLY OPTING-IN  
BASED ON PARENT-  
CENTERED REASONS

# Proposed way to go wrong!

- ▶ Conditionally opting into parenthood based on the *particular* instance of parenthood for *parent-centered* reasons

# Evaluating Conditionally Opting In

- ▶ **Conditional:** If you decide to be a parent, it is wrong to choose to be a parent only under (X) conditions
- ▶ Why think this is problematic?
  - ▶ Failing to live up to accept child as “gift”
  - ▶ The conditions attempting to select against could nevertheless manifest later

# Potentially Particularly Pernicious

- ▶ **ConG:** If you decide to be a parent, it is wrong to choose to be a parent only under (some gender identity) conditions.
- ▶ **ConR:** If you decide to be a parent, it is wrong to choose to be a parent only under (some race) conditions.
- ▶ **ConS:** If you decide to be a parent, it is wrong to choose to be a parent only under (some sexual orientation) conditions.
- ▶ **ConA:** If you decide to be a parent, it is wrong to choose to be a parent only under (some ability) conditions.

# Vectors of Disadvantage

- ▶ The particular conditionals are vectors of privilege and disadvantage – ways that a person's life could be more difficult
- ▶ They could be the **wrong sorts of reasons** to not have a child (on the basis of parent-centered reasons)
  - ▶ perhaps also interesting questions for child-centered reasons remain as well

# Conclusion

IT'S REALLY JUST NOT SIMPLE

LEFTOVER QUESTIONS

# The Opt-Outers aren't off the (moral) Hook

- ▶ If it is permissible to opt out of having children unconditionally, is there a morally problematic way of doing so?
- ▶ Seems my framework gives us a way to say “yes”
- ▶ **Conditional Parent**: If you decide **not** to become a parent, it is wrong to make that choice because of the **potential** for (X) conditions.

# Attend to implicit preferences

- ▶ What are we saying about lives worth living?
  - ▶ Even with child-centered reasons, can we get it right?
  - ▶ Parent-centered reasons, how evaluate you and child's future flourishing?
- ▶ What are we saying about the demands of **parenthood**, compared to other major life projects?
  - ▶ Demand for selflessness? Role in child's life?